



Staten Island pols blast possibility of toll hikes on New Jersey crossings

Michael Sedon/Staten Island Advance By **Michael Sedon/Staten Island Advance**

Email the author

on June 08, 2011 at 8:35 AM, updated June 08, 2011 at 8:52 AM

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- A potential toll hike at the Port Authority's bridges and tunnels drew fire yesterday, as Staten Island's elected officials demanded that the agency stop using the beleaguered borough as its "piggy bank."

"The Port Authority's proposal to raise bridge tolls by 25 percent, from \$8 to \$10, is completely reprehensible at a time when we're all tightening our belts in a recovering economy," said Rep. Michael Grimm. "The Port Authority continues to treat Staten Island residents as a piggy bank for their deficits but does nothing for mass transit."

The four toll plazas on Staten Island account for 6 percent of total annual toll revenues in the nation, with islanders contributing roughly half, or \$150 million, to that figure said Jonathan Peters a professor of finance at the College of Staten Island, who compiled the data from the Federal Highway Administration and the PA's financial statements.

"[The bridges are] huge cash cows already," Peters said, since half of the \$300 million collected annually is pure profit.

The PA controls the Goethals and Bayonne bridges and the Outerbridge Crossing, in addition to the George Washington Bridge and the Lincoln and Holland tunnels. The Verrazano-Narrows Bridge is operated by the MTA.

"More and more, Islanders are working in Hudson, Bergen, Middlesex and Ocean counties," said state Sen. Diane Savino (D-North Shore/Brooklyn). "Staten Island is just that, an island and we must use these bridges. We simply are tapped out."

But an official from the PA denied reports that a toll hike is on the way, and declined to comment further.



Advance file photo

The Port Authority is denying reports that it plans a \$2 fare hike on the Goethals Bridge, as well as the Bayonne Bridge and the Outerbridge Crossing (above).

Also, a spokesman from New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie's office, Michael Drewniak, called the reported toll hike "incorrect." Christie, at a press conference yesterday, flatly denied he had even seen any plans to increase tolls.

"There has been no plan presented to me to raise tolls on the Hudson River crossings, nor have I approved any plan, because I haven't seen one," Christie said.

Although Christie and officials from the PA denied the reported toll hike, Ms. Savino remained skeptical that a plan might be in the works.

"Where there's smoke, there's fire," she said.

Citing the struggling economy, "skyrocketing" gas prices and the fact that residents must use these bridges to leave the island, Assemblywoman Nicole Malliotakis (R-East Shore/ Brooklyn) said now is not the time for a 25 percent toll increase.

"The Port Authority should focus not on increasing the burden on Staten Islanders, but rather on using its already ample budget in a more efficient manner," Ms. Malliotakis said. "Our drivers pay more than their fair share as it stands."

Borough President James P. Molinaro said he talked about a toll increase with PA Executive Director Chris Ward during a previously scheduled conversation.

"It's a further abuse and harassment for people who live on Staten Island," Molinaro said to the Advance. "It did not make me happy."

Molinaro said Island motorists should pay a discounted toll, as should truckers; he frets that increased freight costs will hit consumers in the pocketbook.

Assemblyman Michael Cusick (D-Mid-Island) urged Gov. Andrew Cuomo in a letter to wield his veto, if necessary. "If this toll increase were to go into effect, it would mean that the Port Authority has raised toll rates a staggering 58 percent since 2008," Cusick said. "In a time of economic stagnation and a rapidly rising cost of living, this is not a prudent course of action."

© 2015 SILive.com. All rights reserved.